THE PERSISTENCE OF GOD
Luke 15:1-10
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It is not easy to talk about one's personal experience with God. The pitfalls are real and many, not the least of which is that the fine line between objective truth and wishful thinking fades altogether and the teller may say more than he intends and more than he actually experienced and the poor listener will try to measure his own experience on the basis of what he has heard. Invariably the conclusion is that the teller has experienced something far more profound than I have. We do not speak easily nor successfully about religious experience. We are much better at discussing religious ideas.

One experience, however, is common to almost every attempt to talk about the phenomenon, and that is the experience of being found. In a mystical way, people of extraordinary sensitivity testify that looking for God is evidence that one has already been found by Him.

Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite theologians, has written a fictional trilogy featuring a strange hero, Leo Bebb, ex con, founder of the Church of Holy Love, head of a religious diploma mill.

At the beginning of the third novel Bebb, now deceased, is speaking by way of a cassette tape...and he says...

> "The kingdom of heaven...it's like you're poking around in an old junk shop, and inside an old humpback trunk with the lid half stove in you come across a pack of letters somebody's great granddad tied up with string from a chum back home name of Abe Lincoln... Now you tell me what a man would give to lay his hands on that trunk...He'd give ten, twenty years of his life...and for the Kingdom of Heaven. You know why? Why, because the Kingdom of Heaven, that is what it is. It's life; not the kind of half-baked, moth-eaten life we most of us live most of the time, but the real honest-to-God thing. It's the treasure a man spends all his born days looking for no matter if he knows it or not.
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> "The Kingdom comes by looking for it. The Kingdom comes by not looking for it too hard. There's times the Kingdom comes by it looking for you." (Treasure Hunt, p.8. Frederick Buechner).

That's what Jesus said one day, when He heard that the Pharisees who were conscious seekers of God's Kingdom, were critical of the company He was keeping. Jesus was seen consistently in the company of people who simply didn't seem to care about the Kingdom of Heaven.

They are called sinners. They are not, however, essentially bad people. They are the common folk. They are not part of the religious community. They are the poor, the outsiders, the nobodies. They have neither the inclination nor the sophistication to be involved in institutional religion: its nuances bore them. They play a major role in the New Testament. Jesus apparently got along with them very well. He liked them and they liked Him. The Pharisees, on the other hand didn't like them at all, resented them, regarded them as a threat, probably felt guilty about them and simply avoided them as thoroughly as possible. They were "unclean": that is, they had not participated in the religious rituals which made a person pure and acceptable. To be near them, to break bread with them, therefore was to become unclean oneself.

When the Pharisees saw Jesus of Nazareth - who, more and more was presuming to address them on behalf of their God, associating with these people, they were most unhappy. That is the context, then, for a series of familiar parables. In the first story a shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness in order to track down the one sheep that has strayed. The subtlety of the story is that the shepherd did something no real life shepherd could or would do. You simply can't leave ninety-nine sheep untended in the wilderness. If you did you might not have a flock when you return. The loss of one sheep out of a hundred is serious.But it would simply be unthinkable to risk the entire flock of ninety-nine to find one. We may call this figure the "Good Shepherd" but businessmen would call him foolish. The point is that Jesus was saying something radical about God and something revolutionary about people. He was not, by the way, suggesting that one lost sheep is more valuable that ninety-nine who are still together. He was saying that God is not willing to cut his losses with one single individual. He was saying that God will search and pursue until He finds. And He was saying that there is something very precious, inherently precious, about the individual which warrants the search in the first place. Shepherd + woman - both outcasts -

The second story is similar. The main character is a woman who has lost one of ten silver coins, a drachma, worth one day's wages. Her percentage loss is more severe than the shepherd's, but it is still not devastating. Some scholars think that the coin was very precious, one of the ten coins on the woman's headband, the piece of jewelry which marked her marital status, as precious to her therefore as a wedding ring is to some of us. The point is not monetary value but intrinsic, symbolic, personal value. The woman turned her house upside down until she found the coin and then was very happy. People, Jesus was saying, are that valuable in God's sight.

The Pharisees called them sinners. Jesus, on the other hand, preferred to use the category of "lostness". It occurred to me again, while thinking about this text, that our propensity, our preference, is more Pharisaical than Christlike. Particularly people in the church seem more interested in categories of sin than in the condition of being lost. In Jesus' stories, for instance, lostness comes as a result, first, of an aimless, ignorant drifting. Sheep don't conspire to get lost. They simply walk from one clump of grass to the next and before you or they know it, they're lost. The coin had nothing to do with its condition. Someone else did the losing. And it doesn't take much experience counseling and/or parenting to discover the existential truth of that diagnosis. An astounding number of child abusers were abused children. An astounding number of people with chemical addiction came from families in which a parent suffered from the same disease. Sometimes lostness comes from someone else doing the losing.

But it's always easier to talk about sin, the occasional, intentional anti-social, immoral, or illegal act. It has always been our inclination to reduce our diagnosis of the human condition to the least and simplest common denominator, and to propose - somehow with a straight face - that it is of consequence to Almighty God whether people dance, smoke, drink or play cards. We Christians have always been better at labeling certain acts as sinful than in dealing with the complexity of the human condition. We have walked through the ethical wilderness of our generation clutching our simple moralisms to our breasts and it's no wonder that few people are listening to us any more. It is simply irrelevant to respond to an epidemic of teenage pregnancies, and venereal disease, and the now common practice of co-habitation prior to or instead of marriage by declaring that pre-marital sex is a sin and people who do it are sinners. Nobody's listening to that.

People sit up and take notice, I have observed, when the Gospel of Jesus Christ is allowed to address the human condition with its own strong and honest love. You can trust college students to give straight answers and honest responses. And even college students will listen when the church starts addressing lostness instead of condemning sin.

It is, after all, the most powerful contemporary cultural motif.In literature, cinema and the desperate sense of abandonment in most Rock Music, our culture uses its artistic media to document and sometimes celebrate its sense of lostness, aloneness. In William Styron's Sophie's Choice, a superb novel about a Polish refugee from a Nazi concentration camp, the motif of abandonment and lostness emerges with heart breaking intensity. The heroine of the book has lost her simple Catholic faith. She, as is the case with millions of others, has concluded that God, if He exists at all, has simply turned his back on humankind and that we are alone in the wilderness, clutching for anything that will fill the void.

To be alive today: to be aware and honest is to know that feeling. It is to know that the simple certainties of the past don't work any longer. It is to know the experience of lostness. And the relevance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is precisely in its daring promise that it is just in your experience of lostness that God will come looking for you.

Professor John Knox has written..."The phrase, 'man's search for God' is a misnomer: no man seeks God until he has first heard the shepherd's call". (The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8, p.265). That is the ancient experience which modern theologies force us to confront. It is precisely because we sense the absence or silence of God that we know He exists. It is precisely in our sense of God forsakenness that we know He has not abandoned us. It is precisely in our despair that He chooses to disclose himself. "Whither shall I flee from thy presence?" the Psalmist asked. "If I take the wings of the morning, or dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, or lie down in the fires of hell itself...thou art with me." Even in doubt, negation, God is the persistent pursuer. After a life of alternatingly searching for God and trying to escape from him Augustine wrote in the opening book of his classic "Confessions", "Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee." (p.1).

Pascal, 17th century mathematician, scientist and philosopher, was also a dogged pursuer of religious truth. In a bit of dialogue between God and man he wrote, "You would not be seeking me unless you had already found me."

C.S.Lewis, after a pilgrimage through all the alternatives, finally became a Christian and as far as I know, never discussed the actual conversion except tantalizingly as "Surprised by Joy". Malcolm Muggeridge, whose deep piety has occurred after a long life of skepticism says simply that the God who had been pursuing him across the years found him.

That was the radical teaching of Jesus. The Pharisees never conceived of a God like that. None of us does. Their God was isolated across a chasm of religious purity and righteousness. Other ancient dieties were remote, unconnected with life, uncaring, unfeeling, distant, mystical, unapproachable. The radical word Jesus spoke was the opposite of that. God is the persistent pursuer. He goes after the wandering sheep until He finds it. He gets involved in human life. He is troubled by it. He gets angry and sad. God - the God of Jesus - weeps with his children and laughs for joy, when one of his people is found.

It is not easy to talk about one's personal religious experience. It is not always appropriate. But may I have the privilege of suggesting some places where I believe He is looking for his people? May I suggest that God looks for us, and finds us - gently, carefully, creatively, precisely in our experience of lostness, that if He did not exist, if He had not already touched our lives we would not be bothered by the experience of his absence? If you are struggling with a moral question, an ethical dilemma for which

there is no simple answer, may I suggest that your very discomfort is the evidence that God is finding you? I'm not suggesting that He gives answers, but that his presence is making itself felt in the discomfort of the question. If you are waging an intense battle of conscience: if you are seriously concerned about your community and nation, or your schools, or hospitals or welfare agencies, and can't quite decide where you are on the issues, may I suggest that a God of justice is finding you precisely through your discomfort? If you're doing lonely battle with addiction and with your own self image, and if your pain is precisely in your unwillingness to give in...may I suggest that a God who loves you like a parent, and whose love follows you into every far country, is finding you?

And if you're struggling with reconciliation, if you're torn between your sense of rightness and propriety and the love you feel for a spouse or child or parent who has wronged you: if you want and love and need them and can't bring yourself to say it, may I suggest that the God of reconciliation is the source of the pressure and the agony?

And if your intimate struggle is theological: if you know the language of despair and the dark night of the soul: if the faith of your childhood simply evaporated somewhere between Auschwitz and Hiroshima and VietNam and Watergate: if you feel the pain and emptiness of skepticism, then may I suggest that something very creative is happening? May I propose that even as you flee, God, the persistent pursuer, is finding you?

One matter further. God's love, we believe, is eternal. So is his persistence. The shepherd did not abandon the lost sheep. He looked until he found it. Many people are bothered deeply by the fact that dear ones have died without ever publicly confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. Somewhere along the line they learned that you had to do that to get to Heaven, and even though it violates common sense they are bothered, rather deeply, by regret and remorse. Jesus said that God is persistent. His persistence is eternal. The Good News is that death is no longer the final word: God - and his love - is the eternal and persistent word spoken about each one of us.

He will find us. Jesus said it long ago...

> "When he has found (his sheep) he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost'."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

God our pursuer, do not give up on us. Keep pursuing through our conscience, our struggles, our dearest loves. God, our shepherd, find us and lead us home. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.